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TITLE: Self-Perceived Risk for HIV/AIDS, and Partner Risk Assessment Among Drug Users in The Bay Area, California

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BACKGROUND/OBJECTIVES: Injection drug users (IDUs) play a critical role in the spread of HIV in the United States, as approximately onethird of AIDS cases can be attributed to high-risk drug use. In California, highrisk drug users, their sexual partners, and sex workers have been targeted with special HIV testing and counseling programs designed to increase their utilization of such services. In this presentation, we will identify and discuss the strategies IDUs employ in order to determine their own, and their partners' (both sexual and needle-sharing partners) risk for HIV, and how these strategies translate into reported HIV testing practices and risk reduction behaviors.

METHODS: Project Access conducted qualitative interviews with 67 highrisk individuals from three San Francisco Bay Area counties in 1997, in street and community settings. Respondents were recruited from needle exchange sites, drug treatment programs, mobile health vans, and other outreach venues. Interviewers elicited sex and drug-related risk histories and detailed HIV testing histories from the participants.

RESULTS: Those respondents who were able to identify and discuss their own high-risk status for HIV reported either employment of risk reduction behaviors, or engagement in informed risk taking. Those who were not able to identify their highrisk status seemed to do so for the following reasons: 1) denial; 2) fear of HIV/AIDS; 3) competing concerns; and 4) lack of information or misinformation about HIV/AIDS. Respondents discussed the following strategies as means to assess their partners' risk for HIV: 1) physical appearance (i.e. clean and/or healthy looking); 2) knowledge of that person's drug use or sexual behavior; 3) relationship and trust issues; 4) personal prejudices or stigma; and 5) knowledge of that person's HIV serostatus.

CONCLUSIONS: Drug users have different motivations and utilize a variety of strategies for arriving at conclusions about their own risk for HIV and their partners' risk for HIV. However, other factors effect the association between the identification of risk and the subsequent engagement of safe HIV prevention behaviors: knowledge of HIV/AIDS, fear and denial, competing concerns, and the nature of individuals' interpersonal relationships. Understanding the complex issues concerning the internalization of risk status among highrisk individuals is crucial to developing appropriate and effective HIV prevention resources and interventions.

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